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ABSTRACT

The female-headed, single parent family is a family structure that presents challenges to family life educators, family counselors, and policy makers. For effective delivery of services, accurate information on the functioning of these families is needed. This study used a phenomenological perspective to examine the various challenges faced by women who are single parents. Subjects were 30 women who were between the ages of 25 and 38 years, were employed at least 30 hours per week, had two or more children living in the house, and had no other adult living in the house. During interviews, subjects talked about their lives, families, needs, concerns, strengths, sources of help they would recommend, and how they saw themselves in 10 years. Respondents had concerns about money, time, and child care. They felt that neither their education nor their socialization had prepared them for the lives they were living. Most felt they were functioning adequately and reported feeling proud of their children and happy with their jobs. The findings have implications for family life professionals and for policy makers. (NB)

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First hand lessons in an information age: Single parent working women speak for themselves

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Overview

The "normal" American family of the idealized past was a breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife and 2.2 children. Today's families come in many shapes and styles. The female headed single parent family is one which presents challenges to Family Life Educators, family counselors, and policy makers. These professionals cannot depend simply on interpolation of information about dual career families, nor on assumptions whch are frequently made about the negative aspects and outcomes of single parent families. For effective delivery of service, accurate information is vital.

The research which is reported in this paper presents information about single parent working women and their families, as perceived and described by the women themselves. It is offered as another component which can be considered when decisions are made about dealing with single parent households.

This study used a phenomenological perspective to examine the various challenges faced by women who are single parents. The purpose was to study the lives of these women and the lessons they have learned. The difficulties they encountered and the strengths they identified offer new information on women and their lives.

The theoretical orientation that guided this study was phenomenology, which looks for an understanding, on a personal level, of the motives and beliefs behind people's actions (Laing, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Use of a phenomenological stance leads a researcher to study people in their total life setting and to seek answers through qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

A phenomenological and qualitative approach also fits well with a feminist perspective (Walker & Thompson, 1984). The researcher does not assume an authoritative stance but seeks to share research skills with the participant in order to assure accurate information and interpretations (Davis, 1986). This sharing aligns the researcher and the subject as partners in the study. It reduces the likelihood that the subjects will feel like "research objects" or develop a sense of distrust for the "interrogator" (Mies, 1979). In this type of study, the female "voice" is heard. The subjects are not separated from the context of their lives. Problems are not abstracted from the people who have experienced them (Davis, 1986). One of the difficulties of presenting abstracted, objective views which assume to present true pictures of reality is that they "may represent neither truth nor reality for women" (Geiger, 1986, p. 338). The information gathered through qualitative, phenomenological methods seeks to present the realities of subjects' lives as perceived by the subjects. The representativeness of the

individual's life is not the issue. This assumes we already know the group under study and wish only to see how the individual fits the group. Instead, we need to use social science research to encompass the individual's experience (Geiger, 1986). In effect, we invite the subjects to tell their stories, thus involving them in a commonsense way of describing their own lives (Ruckdeschel & Farris, 1981). Rubin (1976) noted that qualitative studies can add a new dimension to traditional social science research. "Qualitative studies can capture the fullness of experience, the richness of being" (p. 14) and provide new information for the study of a particular group. This type of work offers a link between behaviors and attitudes (Rubin, 1976). Thus, the way in which the individual perceives her own life can be better understood.

Research Questions

The questions addressed in this study reflected the partnership of the researcher and the subjects (Davis, 1986). The questions were general and were phrased in an open-ended manner in order to capture the subjects' perceptions of their circumstances as opposed to what they thought the researcher expected them to say. The research questions which guided this project were:

1. What are the concerns of employed single parent women?
2. What are the strengths of these women?
3. What are the implications of this information for

social policy?

Review of the Literature

The number of single parents in the United States is growing each year. According to Haverlick(1982), a single parent family is a family where one parent has unshared responsibility for the care and direction of children. Between 1970 and 1984, the number of one parent families more than doubled, from 3.2 million to 6.7 million (Norton & Glick, 1986). Currently, 90% of all single parent households in the United States are headed by women (Berkman, 1985). Berkman indicated that, "If current trends continue, over 50% of all children born during this decade will spend at least one of their childhood years in a household headed by a single parent" (p. 39).

Living in a single parent family "has its unique and sometimes problematic aspects" (Cherlin, 1981, p.74). In a survey of 64 single parents, six areas emerged as problematic: handling family finances; medical/dental care; transportation; meeting the children's emotional needs; handling or controlling the children; and household tasks such as repairs or moving (Gladow & Ray, 1984).

The number of employed women has been growing rapidly in the United States since the 1940s (Oppenheimer, 1982). More and more mothers, especially single parent mothers, have entered the work force. Currently, 76.8% of single women with school age children are in the work force (Burden, 1986). However, when it comes to work, women are viewed

differently than men. Because women have traditionally been bound to home and hearth for the purposes of childrearing, they are in a unique position with respect to employment (Felmlee, 1984). Women tend to be concentrated in the secondary employment sector. Rather than working in primary jobs such as engineering, medicine, law or science, they are overrepresented in the service sector. The work they do tends to be more poorly paid once educational requirements are taken into account (Treiman & Terrell, 1975).

Partly due to time out for childbirth and childrearing, women's employment history tends to be spotty and erratic. They are viewed as marginal workers and are given marginal jobs--low paid, low status and insecure (Schorr & Moen, 1979). Their jobs may be part-time and may revolve around the needs of the children and their schedules.

In addition to the difficulties of finding adequate paid employment, single parent working women suffer from time and social pressures. The demands of being a single working parent "severely limit the time, energy, and money the divorced woman has to devote to her own life" (Weitzman, 1986, p,345). There is not enough energy to cover all the required activities, but worse, the women are punished for trying to manage it all. They are punished at home for not nurturing enough because their energy was used at work. Then they are punished at work because they are unreliable if they have to leave to pick up a sick child (Scott, 1984).

Methodology

Sample

Thirty working single parent women were interviewed for this study. The criteria for participation were: employed 30 hours a week or more; two or more children living in the house; no other adult in the house. Of the women who participated in the study, fifteen had a gross income of $16,000 or less per year. The other 15 earned $18,000 or more per year. One third of the women earned less than $10,000. The higher income women were expected to serve as a comparison group to the women in poverty. Originally, it was assumed that the lower income group would have lower educational attainments and would be working at jobs which were not considered professional. As will be explained further in the data analysis, income, education, and professional status did not appear to be related for this sample.

The income range was planned to include those who earned the minimum wage and to extend to women who earned higher incomes. However, a survey of potential subjects located by three social service agencies revealed that typically women who worked for minimum wage were not employed full time. Part time employment reduces the cost to employers because they are not required to pay overtime, vacation, or hospitalization benefits. Due to this factor, women who worked for minimum wage and would have formed a subject pool for the study did not meet the requirement of full time employment.

Subjects were selected from three social service agencies. As an additional source of subjects, singles groups in various churches were contacted. Names were received from Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic singles groups. Snowball sampling was also used. This techinique involved asking a subject for names of others to participate in the project (Rubin, 1976: Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The women in the study ranged in age from 25 to 38. All were the heads of their households; no other adult was currently living in the home. All had graduated from high school, and 14 had earned a college degree of some kind. Of these, three were Master's degrees, seven were Bachelor's degrees, and four were Associates.

All of the women who had Master's degrees worked in the public school system. This was the only group in which all of the women were working in their field of training. The teachers held teaching positions and the occupational therapist worked with orthopedically handicapped children. Of the seven women with Bachelor's degrees, one woman with an English degree worked in mediation. The biologist worked in a floral shop; the math major was in insurance. The other five all worked in their respective fields of nutrition, physical therapy, and accounting. Of the women with Associate's degrees, one hygienist worked in her field; another was in a floral shop. The nurse worked in an insurance company, and the woman with a degree in food service loaded trucks. The occupations of the 16 women who

had completed only high school ranged from secretarial positions to computer technicians and software testers. One worked in a florist shop and another was a legal secretary. A third woman was an estimator for a construction company.

Incomes ranged from $9,000 per year to $31,000. Of the four women who earned $9,000, one had a Bachelor's degree, one an Associate's degree, and two had high school diplomas. Two worked in florist shops, one in sales and one as a secretary. The woman who earned $31,000 worked for a utility company and had only a high school education.

The women who were in secretarial positions earned from $9,000 to $22,000. None of them had degrees beyond high school. Positions held by those with Bachelor's degrees paid from $9,000 for a florist's assistant to $25,000 for the physical therapist and insurance rater. The women with Master's degrees earned from $18,000 to $24,000.

Data Collection

Once names were received, the potential subjects were contacted. The original eligibility interview was conducted on the telephone. This gave the researcher an opportunity to determine whether or not the subject met the criteria for the study. At the same time, the purpose of the study was explained and an initial rapport was established. If the person qualified, an appointment was set for the main interview.

The second interview was scheduled for two hours and was tape recorded. The interviews began with the collection of

demographic data. Information on the subject's age, educational background, job description, and income was gathered. In addition, she was asked about her childrens' names and ages.

The interview questions were printed on a 3x5 card and handed to each subject at the start of the interview. This gave the participants an opportunity to feel somewhat in control of the situation. They knew the questions and had a chance to move from one to another, knowing they could come back and finish a topic later. It also gave them the opportunity to assist the researcher in keeping the interview within the proposed time limits. The questions for the study were:

Tell me about your life

Tell me about your family

Tell me about your needs

Tell me about your concerns

Tell me about your strengths

Tell me about sources of help you would recommend

How do you see yourself in 10 years?

At the end of the second interview, the subject was askd if the researcher could contact her in two weeks to determine if any information had been missed. No definite time for the third interview was set at that time.

Single Parent Working Women:
Their Concerns and Strengths

In speaking for themselves, the women in the study 11

identified concerns which troubled them and strengths which enabled them to manage their lives. They felt that their education and their socialization had failed to prepare them for the lives they were leading. They had concerns about money, time and child care, especially the care of sick children. Lastly, they discussed the strengths which enabled them to manage their lives adequately in spite of the difficulties.

Concerns

The question, "Tell me about your family" elicited responses about each woman's family of origin and her expectations of how marriage and family were supposed to be. Although 11 of the women had experienced the death or divorce of parents, all of them still expected to be part of a two parent intact marriage. Neither their education nor their experience in their families had properly prepared them for their present situation:

> My sisters and I were raised with the idea that we would be grown and married and somebody would take care of us. My brother was the most important.

By word and by action, these families had indicated to the women that they should marry and raise families:

> I was the last of the generation that was raised to grow up and have a nice little family. "Don't aspire to be anything else".

So I got married when I was 19.

The gap between these expectations and the reality the women were experiencing caused considerable stress and discomfort. The women in the study felt something was wrong in their lives because they did not fit the mold which had been presented to them.

> I was raised thinking...never being told you are going to be a housewife and a mother, but boy I saw it. And it appealed to me. I feel like I'm in some sort of a temporary situation.

The reality of these women's upbringing left them inadequately prepared for the task of supporting their families. Their education was not sufficient to qualify them for jobs in which they could earn adequate salaries. Four of the women went back to school after their divorces in order to prepare themselves for better jobs.

> I went back to school because I had these visions of myself at 65 standing at a typewriter typing pharmacy labels. I had a chance to go back and do something I really chose to do for the rest of my life.

Single parenting presented several major areas of stress for the women in the study. Money, time and child care were

mentioned often. Each of these three areas caused concern, but greater problems occurred when the difficulties of work and time interacted with the exigencies of child care, for example, when the children were sick.

Money was an overriding issue for most of the women. Weitzman (1985) mentioned that over 70% of the divorced women in her study reported being perpetually worried about making ends meet and being able to pay their bills. Many of the women in the present study had experienced a considerable drop in their standards of living as compared to when they were married.

> That's one of the things about single mothers. The dads seem to keep their status. But the mothers don't.

> I think the biggest change is financial. That's the hardest part.

Time was another critical area of concern. The time spent at work was obviously not available to be spent with the children. Once the concerns of work and children are managed, the woman has almost no time or energy left for her own personal needs.

> Holding down a job, keeping a house clean...it seems that you tend to let things for yourself slide.

> Trying to devote enough time to them and have your own life too. I guess balancing time may be one of the more difficult things.
>
> How do you go to work and keep your mind on your job to the point where you can do a good job and get raises and promotions when at home all this other stuff is going on.
>
> And on the weekends then, mow the yard, and clean the house, and wash the clothes. When you get through doing that, it's Monday all over again.

Sometimes it was not possible to strike an optimal balance between the needs of the job and the needs of the children. Corcoran (1984) notes that many women who work feel the need to balance the demands of work and family. They may be forced to accept lower paying jobs so their schedules will allow them to be absent when the children are sick. Some of the women in the present study had chosen jobs which allowed flexibility in order to manage the conflict between work and children. They were earning less money and were sometimes working out of their fields of training in order to arrange time to be with their children when they were sick or when other situations arose.

I spend a lot of time when the kids are here

being mom. That's one reason I have the job I have. I could probably make more money in another setting.

They call me up and I get off work. Take them out of day care, and I'm home. No money coming in.

The job I'm on is very convenient. It is one of the few things that I can do that if the babysitter calls, I can leave. For a long time, that's gonna be what I have to have.

Even when the children were well, child care was a continuing source of problems. Its cost and quality were considerations which had to mesh with the money and the time available.

I wasn't that pleased with the quality of most of the daycare that I've had them in. I would really worry about them.

Even when child care was available, the women still felt guilty about having to leave the children so much of the time.

Single parenting is okay if you can get over the guilty part. To me, spending your entire summer in a day care...there can't be anything

> more depressing. One of the things I really enjoyed growing up was just bumming around in the summer.

Strengths

The women in the study were similar to those studied by Weitzman (1985). She mentioned that the women she studid expressed pride in their ability to cope with the hardships they had encountered. An ironic result of their beginning their divorced lives "with a long list of negatives -- less money, inadequate vocational skills, low self esteem, heightened anxiety and stress, and a great fear about the future -- is that they are likely to find their lives after divorce better and more satisfying than they anticipated" (p. 345). In spite of all their difficulties, all of the women in the present study felt that they were functioning adequately. They were proud of their children and of the family they had created. Many of them enjoyed their jobs.

> I mean, I could work from seven in the morning to seven at night and skip lunch.

> I think another of my strengths, too, is that I really enjoy my job. It would be a lot harder if I hated what I was doing.

Some of the women felt that the benefits they received from working extended far beyond the money they earned. They

gained a sense of themselves as functioning adults. They could find adult company and escape from the responsibilities of the children. They also responded to the interpersonal relationships as well as to the work itself as Andrisani (1978) noted in his study.

> If I didn't have the job I've got now...It's the best job I ever had. I like it. I don't know what I'd do.

> I feel like my work is my salvation. If I didn't have my work to go to to get me away...

Successful single parenting offered some feelings of satisfaction. The women were proud of themselves and of their children.

> They are our hope for everything. I have a lot of hope invested in these guys.
> As far as family goes, I feel real great about having my kids.

Life in a single parent home meant that some of the women had taught their children skills they might not have learned so early in another setting. This training was another source of pride.

> My boys are gonna grow up and get them an apartment and know how to keep it clean. They know how to load the washing machine. They

know how to sort the wash.

Implications for Family Life Professionals

The information about marriage and raising families which these women received was not sufficient to help them in managing their lives as single parents. Young women, as well as young men, need to learn about career choices, money management, and taking care of themselves. The women in the study had not received adequate information in these areas.

Programs in child care centers, Sunday Schools, elementary, and secondary schools are needed to help young men and women learn the necessary relationship and life management skills to survive even if they are not living in the "normal" American family. Provision of information in these areas and opportunity for development of self management skills may better prepare the next generation of parents for whatever type of family they find themselves directing.

Policy Implications

Low paying, unstable jobs are all that is available to many women who have few marketable job skills or who need to be able to leave work when the children are sick. If these women could be helped to achieve higher pay and more stable jobs, this could result in higher self esteem and greater confidence in their parental abilities (Pett & Vaughn-Cole, 1986). Education and training in job skills need to be suggested to young women just as they are to young men.

The fact that many of the women still wished to be at home in a two parent marriage indicates that their socialization did not prepare them for the situation in which they have found themselves. Since one third of today's marriages will probably end in divorce, the young women of today need to be prepared more realistically to meet the demand which will very likely be made of them (Pett & Vaughn-Cole, 1986). Education and socialization programs could possibly be included in the programs of child care centers as well as in schools.

The final area in which social policy changes are indicated by this study is that of child care. Availability, quality, and cost were concerns of many of the women in the study. Some system of funding child care is essential if larger and larger numbers of children are not going to be left at home untended while their mothers work. The auxiliary problem to child care is that of care for sick children. None of the women in the sample had a satisfactory system for managing work and sick children, and all expressed the need for informal and formal support to help them cope with this inevitability.

Conclusions

The needs and concerns of single parent working women center on money, time, and children. Women who are single parents today were raised with the expectation that they would marry and have children. The accompanying expectation was that the marriage would last for life, and the man would

be willing and able to support them. None of the women in the study were living in such a setting. Their socialization process had failed to prepare them for the realities of limited income and time which plague single parent women.

Child care is essential for a working parent. Care for sick children was either not available or was prohibitively expensive, at least in the experience of these 30 women. This gap in the child care system was a trap that kept many of the women in low paying, low status jobs. They felt that they must be able to leave work to care for sick children because no one else would do it. This led to the need for a job which allowed that flexibility even if it was low-paying or not in their fields of training. The result of these factors is the self-perpetuating cycle which keeps women from improving their situations, at least while the children are young.

The pressures exerted on the women in the study are probably typical of those experienced by other single parent working women. They are constantly required to choose between the two necessary chores of earning money and providing nurturance for their children. Their perseverance in the provision of nurturance, therefore, means that they are punished in the area of work. Low pay and unstable jobs are the price for availability for caretaking. This is a clear statement about the value of caretaking in our society. It is also a statement about the value of the work that women do. Until these areas are addressed, it is unlikely that

single working women and their children will begin to move out of the cycle of poverty.

Each of the women in the study spoke for herself, and only for herself. None of them presumed to speak for the total population of single parent working women. None seemed to be particularly aware that many other women were in the same situation. They simply managed their their lives on an individual and personal basis. It seems unlikely that the situation of working single parent women will change until these women see themselves as part of a group and begin to speak for themselves and for others. As long as these women continue to speak only for themselves, we can learn much about their individual lives, but few changes will be made at institutional or policy levels. Once women begin to speak, changes in education, career training, and socialization will start. Perhaps, the next generation, even if many are single parents who work, will know how to make themselves heard.

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